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ABSTRACT

Contrasting approaches to early childhood education are evident in the constructivist versus instructivist schools of thought. On one side, the child is seen as active constructor of knowledge and understanding; on the other, the child is dependent on another's instruction in knowledge and skills. This paper explores some of the implications of the traditional dichotomies in the field of early childhood education and raises issues leading to other ways to define the goals of the field. To a large extent both sides of the early childhood curriculum debate may be overlooking other options. In particular, the debate under-emphasizes and under-values a third option: namely, the importance of children's intellectual development. Differences between intellectual and academic goals and activities are outlined: while academic goals address small units of knowledge and skills, intellectual goals address dispositions or habits of mind that include a variety of tendencies to interpret experience. It is reasonable to assume that the major intellectual dispositions are in-born in all children, but that unless the curriculum provides contexts in which the intellectual dispositions can be exercised and strengthened, they may be weakened or even lost. However, a strong academic "instructivist" approach may undermine the disposition to use the very knowledge and skills so intensely instructed. Thus the appropriate curriculum for young children is one that addresses the acquisition of academic skills (for example, how to read) in such a way that the dispositions to use them are also strengthened (for example, liking to read). The paper concludes by describing project work as a context for exercising both intellectual dispositions and academic skills. Contains 30 references. (EV)

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Distinctions between Academic and Intellectual Goals in Early Childhood Education

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Distinctions between Academic and Intellectual Goals: Implications for dispositional development

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Introduction

Dissention concerning curriculum and teaching methods is a long tradition in the field of early childhood education in the US. Roopnarine and Johnson (1993) note that early childhood education is a "profession teeming with controversy, impassioned with deeply held convictions, and inspired by rival value systems" (p. iii).

This history of persistent polarization concerning curriculum and teaching methods is related to many factors. Among them are ideological positions--usually referred to as philosophies, competing theories of development and learning, and conflicting pressures from various stakeholders concerning the desired outcomes of early childhood education.

The issues involved have been expressed in various ways. Some positions are stated in terms of the aims and goals of the programs, e.g. academic learning versus personal-social development (See Stipek, 1993). Some scholars define the issues in terms of the respective roles of the teacher and children, e.g. teacher-directed versus child-initiated (Marcon, 1992, 1995). Others express the issues in terms of the content or nature of the activities offered, e.g. Hirsch (1996) (See Goffin, 1994).

Preferences as Dichotomies

Current use of the concept *constructivism* (for formulating curriculum and teaching methods suggests that current dissension in the field can be dichotomized as two views on children's learning. On one side the child is seen as active constructor of knowledge and understandings versus the other in which the child is dependent on another's instruction in knowledge and skills (See Katz, 1996). This dichotomy captures the major disagreements at issue, namely, the extent to which an early childhood curriculum and its associated teaching methods offer children ample opportunity to actively explore their environments, in contrast to those dominated by formal instruction in basic academic skills and emphasizing children's passive reception of the knowledge transmitted. These dichotomies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. A summary of the common terms used to describe contrasting emphases to curriculum and teaching methods in early childhood education

Constructivist	Instructivist
Child initiated	Teacher initiated or directed
Child-centered	Teacher-centered
Play-based, progressive	Didactic or Traditional
Personal-social development	Basic academic skills
Developmentally appropriate	Developmentally inappropriate
Process oriented	Product oriented
Informal/Unstructured	Formal/Structured
Progressive/ Child centered - children construct their own knowledge	Core Knowledge

The purpose of this essay is to explore some of the implications of the traditional dichotomies in the field, and to raise issues leading to other ways to define the goals of early childhood education.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

One of the strongest efforts to put the longstanding controversies over curriculum and teaching methods to rest was the 1987 position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC). Expressed in terms of what was deemed *developmentally* appropriate (Bredekamp, 1987), the document was not offered as a curriculum or set of teaching methods. Its purpose was to suggest that evaluation of the appropriateness of curricula and teaching methods for young children should be based on what is known about normative patterns of young children's development and individual variations within them. The document, titled *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (DAP), was well received, especially among practitioners. Among many scholars DAP engendered still further debates and discussions, especially on cultural and ideological issues, (see Spodek, 1988; Delpit, 1988, Jipson, 1991; Lubeck (1992), Fleer, (1995). In response to the critiques a revised edition was published in 1997 (Bredekamp and Copple).

Among the major revisions in the second edition of DAP is the attempt to eschew the dichotomous "either/or" approach to curriculum and teaching methods in favor of a *both/and* approach. It lists nine examples of ways that early childhood practices should incorporate both sides of the traditionally contrasting models or approaches (See Bredekamp and Copple, 1997, p. 23). However, as shown in the results of a study of contrasting curriculum models by Marcon, (1992; 1995), empirical studies fail to demonstrate the benefits one would expect of a "best of both worlds" curriculum strategy advocated by Bredekamp & Copple (1997) and by Alexander, Murphy & Woods (1996),

The main argument presented in this paper is that to a large extent both sides of the early childhood curriculum may be overlooking other options. In particular, the debate under-emphasizes and under-values a third option: namely, the importance of children's *intellectual* development, which is quite distinct from the focus of the instructivist emphasis on the acquisition of basic *academic* skills. The distinctions between the intellectual and academic goals and activities are outlined below.

Academic and intellectual goals and activities

Academic goals and activities

During a period of about twenty years the term *academic* has been used to denote those parts of the early childhood curriculum designed to help children to master the basic skills involved in literacy and numeracy (Jacobsen, 1996). Several factors may account for increasing pressure in the US and elsewhere to launch preschool children into mastery of those academic knowledge and skills (e.g. in literacy and numeracy). One factor is increasing demand that preschool programs ensure children's readiness for the next school setting. Another is the traditional tendency at every level of education to push down the expectations and curriculum from older to younger children. Another consideration is that the importance given to play as a natural and active way that children learn may be a less convincing priority today than it was half a century ago when opportunities and artifacts for play, especially at

home, were then considerably less plentiful for the majority of children.

In preschool programs with a strong academic focus – an 'instructivist' approach - the teacher's role is that of expert and the role of the child is a passive and reactive, rather than the active and interactive one expected in the 'constructivist' approach. Doyle (1986) states that academic goals that are addressed by direct instruction "are defined by answers students are required to produce" (p. 177). They frequently involve memorizing lists or symbols, responding to questions that have correct answers, practicing routine tasks that can be specified and assessed as right or wrong, correct or incorrect.

Academic tasks are typically carefully structured, sequenced and decontextualized, relatively small bits of information and discrete skills that usually require some careful individual or small group instruction by a knowledgeable adult. They include also exercises designed to help achieve mastery of them. The academic tasks in the early childhood curriculum usually address facts and skills that the majority of children are unlikely to learn spontaneously or by discovery, though under favorable conditions, many children do. For example, under the right environmental conditions, many young children can "pick up" the names of colors and shapes and need little in the way of didactic or systematic, formal instruction to learn them. As in the case of acquiring phonemic awareness, academic goals address items of knowledge that have to be memorized and rehearsed. These items of knowledge may be spontaneously "constructed" by children, as can be seen in invented spelling; but in such cases they are largely mis-

constructed and require assistance to re-construct them correctly.

Similarly, the alphabet, an arbitrary sequence of symbols developed over a long period of Western history, has no inherent discoverable logic. It has to be mastered with the help of knowledgeable others who encourage frequent repetition and who correct errors until mastery is achieved. In the case of most young children, it would be wasteful and inefficient for them to have to "discover" such things as the alphabet, or punctuation rules, the pledge of allegiance, the national anthem or other conventional knowledge by self-initiated discovery processes.

Much of the current contentiousness between the 'instructivists' and 'constructivists' is about the extent to which formal didactic instruction is appropriate or necessary for those young children whose early environments do not give rise to spontaneous informal learning of basic things like the alphabet, the names of colors and shapes, etc. As indicated below, longitudinal studies comparing "instructivist" and "constructivist" approaches suggest that the early gains of children in the former do not last more than a few years.

Intellectual goals and activities

While academic goals address small units of knowledge and skills, intellectual goals address dispositions, i.e. habits of mind that include a variety of tendencies to interpret experience (Katz, 1993). The intellectual dispositions include the dispositions to analyze, hypothesize, and synthesize, to predict and to check

predictions, to strive for accuracy, to be empirical, consequences of actions, to persist in seeking problem solutions, and to theorize about cause-effect relationships, to predict others' wishes and feelings, and many others.

It is reasonable to assume that the most important intellectual dispositions are in-born in all humans and are likely to be fairly robust in very young children. For example, the dispositions to make sense of experience, to be curious, and to be empirical, can be observed in virtually all very young children, regardless of family income and environment. Indeed, one of the hazards of living and working with toddlers is that their powerful in-born dispositions to be empirical could lead to suicide if their supervision falters in any way!

The risks of neglecting the intellectual dispositions

While the manifestation of some intellectual dispositions is likely to be provoked and supported in both academic and non-academic curriculum models, they deserve explicit attention in the curriculum planning and teaching methods for several reasons outlined below.

Mindless activities in preschools.

First, just because young children are not offered the formal academic instruction characteristic of the 'instructivist' position does not, in and of itself, mean that their intellectual dispositions are sufficiently addressed. I have observed many early childhood programs in which children spend a lot of time on relatively mindless

activities like cutting and pasting pre-cut Valentine hearts, and in group discussions about favorite pets from which the majority of the participants withdraw within minutes. While such activities are not advocated by the 'constructivists,' providers of such programs may believe that they are good because they do not to inflict premature formal instruction on young children. While such activities do no harm and may be beneficial in many ways, they lack sufficient intellectual vitality to support the intellectual dispositions.

Recovery of lost dispositions.

As suggested earlier, it seems reasonable to assume that the major intellectual dispositions are in-born in all children. However, unless the curriculum provides contexts in which the intellectual dispositions can be behaved and strengthened by being used and applied meaningfully, they may be weakened or even lost. If they are lost they seem to be very difficult to reinstate. In other words, unless they are expressed and supported with sufficient frequency they may be weakened, and again, may be very resistant to re-learning. Long ago Margaret Donaldson (1978) noted that all children seem to begin with eagerness to find things out and to pose questions, to do what is asked of them in school, and that "The problem then is to understand how something that begins so well can often end so badly" (p. 14).

Damaged disposition hypothesis

Observation of children in a wide variety of academically oriented programs confirms the fact that young children can engage in formal lessons and academic exercises designed to instruct them in basic skills such as phonics, counting, and handwriting, and often quite willingly. But the extent to which they *should* do so must be evaluated in light of the potential cumulative effects that these exercises may have on the development and strengthening of desirable dispositions. Professional educators are obliged to take into account the potential cumulative effects of early experiences, no matter how benign they appear at the time they occur.

I suggest that a strong academic 'instructivist' approach may undermine the disposition to use the very knowledge and skills so intensely instructed. Indeed, there is reason to believe that early instruction in and mastery of phonics or arithmetic may be obtained at the risk of undermining the dispositions to use the learnings. Note here the distinction between having reading skills and having the disposition to be a reader. I am suggesting that the disposition to be readers and to be ready users of mathematical concepts and skills may be damaged by premature instruction, given the amount of drill and practice usually required for success in mastering these skills at an early age. This concern can be referred to as the *damaged disposition hypothesis* (Katz, 1985).

Longitudinal studies. The damaged disposition hypothesis seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the results of several longitudinal studies (Karnes et al., 1983; Marcon, 1993,. 1994; Miller & Bizzell, 1983; Schweinhart et al., 1986a; see also Walberg, 1984; Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983). As we look at

the results of these studies, the early pressure on young children to perform academic tasks taught by direct instruction (e.g., practice in phonics, workbook exercises) appears quite harmless or even beneficial at first. Certainly many of the children *can* perform the tasks involved.

On the whole these studies suggest that while formal instructional teaching methods during the preschool and kindergarten years may appear to be beneficial in the *short term*, they show negative effects on academic, intellectual and social development in the *long term* (Schweinhart, 1997, Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997, Marcon, 1992, 1995). In particular, the long term follow-up studies of children in High/Scope's Perry Preschool Program, (see Schweinhart, 1997) and the follow-up studies of Marcon, (1995) indicate that in the long term children benefit greatly academically, intellectually, and socially from early childhood programs that provide opportunities for them to take initiative, and to be actively engaged in their own learning experiences. Marcon (1995) refers to the long-term negative effects of early formal direct instructional programs as the "Fourth Grade Slump." Marcon summarizes her findings as follows:

> "the negative impact of overly academic early childhood programs on achievement and social development was clearly apparent by the fourth grade. Children who had attended [Academically Directed] prekindergarten programs were scoring noticeably lower in fourth grade despite their adequate performance on third-grade standardized achievement tests. The [Academically directed] children were also developmentally behind their peers and displayed notably higher levels of maladaptive behavior (i.e. defiant behavior, anxiety, and distractibility) (Marcon, 1995, p. 19).

Results from these longitudinal studies suggest that curriculum design for young children should be approached in a way that optimizes the *simultaneous* acquisition of knowledge, skills, *and* desirable dispositions. It is clearly not very useful to have skills if the dispositions to use them is undermined in the process of acquiring them. On the other hand, having the disposition without the skills is also inconsistent with the goals of education. The challenge, then, is to help the learner with both the acquisition of skills and with desirable dispositions that invoke the application of those skills. For example, having reading skills must be accompanied by experiences that also strengthen the disposition to be a reader. When both skills and dispositions are addressed the chances increase that the learner will increase in skillfulness and master more content. Thus an appropriate curriculum for young children is one that addresses both the acquisition of academic skills in such a way that the dispositions to use them are also strengthened. A robust disposition to be a reader can serve al of the intellectual goals of education throughout life.

In sum, I am suggesting that it is possible for both the 'instructivist' and 'constructivist' positions to overlook important intellectual goals. The academic activities should not be confused with intellectual vitality, and the 'constructivist' approaches do not guarantee that what the children initiate, plan, do, and review, or engage in during spontaneous play is sufficient to strengthen important intellectual dispositions.

The Process versus product dichotomy.

In is not unusual to hear early childhood and other educators argue the relative value of emphasizing the processes in which children engage more than the products that result from them. This is another dichotomy in education that may prevent us from noting a third, or other positions on the matter. I suggest that it is not very beneficial for children to engage in desirable processes, e.g. investigations, focused on poor, shallow or worthless content and leading to products of low standards. Similarly, it seems unwise, as well as unnecessary, to offer children rich content via inappropriate processes, regardless of the quality of the products. The same can be said of good products resulting from poor processes about poor content. In other words, an appropriate curriculum for young children should address with equal care, the nature of the processes employed, the value of the content covered or uncovered, and the quality of the products.

Curriculum components that support the development of intellectual dispositions

An appropriate curriculum thus includes ample opportunity for strengthening and using the intellectual dispositions, plus good processes about rich content, resulting in high quality products. For these reasons many of my colleagues and I have been helping teacher to incorporate project work into the curriculum for young children (Katz & Chard, 1989, Katz, 1994; Beneke, 1998,).

Excellent examples of meaningful long term projects in which children's intellects as well as growing academic skills flourish can be seen in the work of preprimary children in Reggio Emilia reported in the book Shoe and

Meter, (Reggio Children, 1997), as well as in reports of projects like Beneke's Rearview Mirror. Reflections on a Preschool Car Project. These are just two examples that show how young children can express their intellectual dispositions in the pursuit of serious topics, and apply their emerging and growing academic skills, and generate high quality products simultaneously.

Project work provides contexts not only for the intellectual dispositions involved in the investigations that children undertake; it also provides texts, and pretexts for children to make meaningful and functional use of the academic skills they are taught during the 'instructive' parts of the curriculum. Thus we might plan the early childhood curriculum as focused on at least a trio of goals: (1) social/emotional and (2) intellectual development as well as (3) meaningful academic skill acquisition.

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